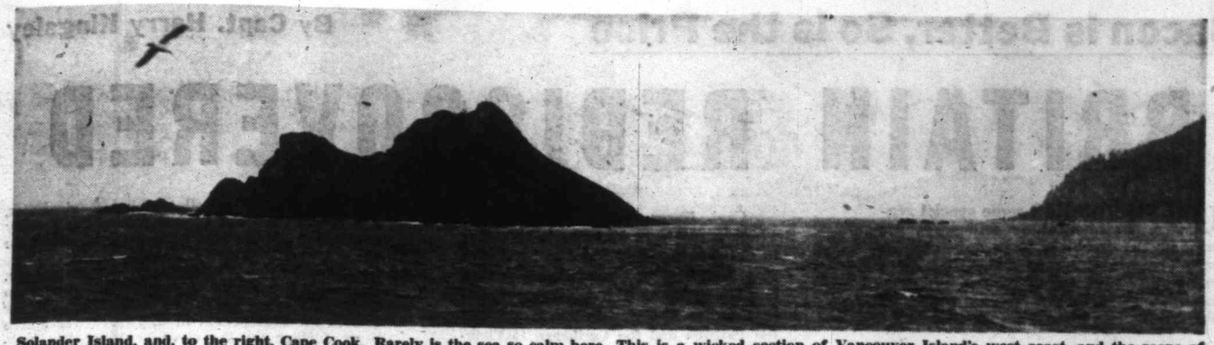

Solander Island, and, to the right, Cape Cook. Rarely is the sea so calm here. This is a wicked section of Vancouver Island's west coast, and the scene of many marine tragedies. Yet this forbidding piece of scenery is the one chosen to honor the name of one of the greatest navigators of his time: Capt. James Cook, who was the first European to set foot on Vancouver Island.

West Coast Story

By George Nicholson

CAPE of STORMS HONORS COOK'S MEMORY

IN THE PROCESS of selecting suitable names for the more prominent geographical features of the British Columbia coast, one name, it seems, was almost overlooked. It was that of Capt. James Cook, RN, that famous navigator and father of British hydrography, who, after almost completing his third voyage of discovery around the world, landed at Nootka in April, 1778, and thus became the first white man to set foot on these shores.

But when, 82 years later, a suitable landmark was selected to perpetuate his name, the site chosen could by no means be described as a garden of paradise.

That Cook's name should appear only once on the first Admiralty charts, is surprising, for the names of others, British, Spanish and American, closely associated with the early history of this coast, but who came long after Cook, appeared several times, together with the names of their ships.

Named after Captain (then second master) George Alexander Browning, of HM survey vessel Hecate, were two passages, an entrance, a creek (small inlet), a group of small islands, a rock and a port, all on different parts of the coast. And no less than nine geographical features were named for HMS Hecate herself.

A harbor, sound, bay and a small island were named after Edward Parker Bedwell, second master of the Plumper and later commanding the Hecate. Five times we find the name Moresby, for Rear-Admiral Fairfax Moresby, commander-in-chief, Pacific station, 1850-1853, and four Maynes, for Richard Charles Mayne, who served on this coast, 1855-1861, as a lieutenant, and later became an admiral.

HM ships Chatham, Thetis and Grappler each was so honored four times. The Hudson's Bay Company steamers Otter and Beaver, six and seven, respectively.

By way of remembering Alexandro Malaspina, that celebrated Italian seaman, who, while serving in the Spanish navy visited this coast in 1791, we have a mountain (in the coast range opposite Nanaimo, hence Malaspina hotel), an inlet, an island and a strait.

In many instances where similar localities on different parts of the coast were identified by the name of the same man or ship, recent surveys conducted by the Canadian hydrographic survey have substituted new names and so removed these duplications.

CAPE COOK is at the extreme end of Brooks Peninsula, which is about midway between Kyuquot and Quatsino Sounds, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Cook sighted this bold promontory, as he described it in his journals, on March 29, 1778, a few days before making his historical landing at Friendly Cove, Nootka. He named it Woody Point, and thus it appeared on his and subsequent charts until 1860, when Captain George H. Richards, HM surveying vessel Plumper, changed it in honor of the great navigator.

Standing about a mile off the cape is Solander Island, half a mile long, 400 feet high, barren except for stunted shrubbage, the home of sea lions and a breeding place for sea birds. It was first named Split Rock, because of its shape, by Captain George Dixon, who was on this coast with Cook, and later (1787) in the King George. Captain Richards, of the Plumper, renamed it Solander, in 1860, after Dr. Daniel Charles Solander, a distinguished Swedish botanist and member of the medical profession, who accompanied Cook on his first voyage of discovery to the South Pacific. Solander was never on this coast.

The sea lion herds on Solander Island were always a source of interest to the passengers on the West Coast steamer Princess Maquinna. That is, when the sea was sufficiently calm to permit the captain to approach near enough for a close look. A toot from the ship's whistle and the huge animals would make a mad scramble into the sea.

BROOKS PENINSULA was named in 1862 by Captain Richards, after the name which Captain Charles Duncan, of the trading sloop Princess Royal, gave in 1788 to what is now known as Klaskish, a small inlet immediately to the west, where Duncan anchored on his way south from the Queen Charlotte Islands. However, neither Richards nor Duncan identity Brooks.

This oblong-shaped land formation is approximately 10 miles long and six wide, heavily wooded, with hills rising to 2,500 feet. Although it juts further out into the Pacific Ocean (in a southwesterly direction) than any other headland on the coast, it has no lighthouse. The only light in this vicinity is an unwatched light on Solander Island.

To the west is another small inlet, Klaskino, and to the east, Nasparti, Ououkinsh and Malksope Inlets. Their respective entrances are strewn with reefs and not one offers a safe anchorage.

Without a doubt, this 60-mile stretch of coastline, with its deep indentations accounting for an additional several hundred miles, is the most desolate and God-forgotten piece of real estate in B.C. Mariners give it a wide berth. In bad weather, so great are the seas in this locality, the Princess Maquinna, one of the best sea boats the CPR ever had, after leaving Quatsino Sound southbound, sometimes had to turn back—a thing she never had to do on any other part of the West Coast during the 40 years she sailed between Victoria and Port Alice.

Except for an occasional trapper, the entire area is totally uninhabited. In late summer, a few Kyuquot Indians visit the streams at the head of the inlets to get their winter's supply of smoked salmon, but none actually lives there.

Viewed from the deck of a passing steamer, the scene today is the same as when Cook first saw it through his telescope. Not a wisp of smoke, not a tree disturbed, and the only sign of life, the sea birds and sea lions on Solander Island.

Here one is about as far from civilization on Vancouver Island as it is possible to get. Owing to the trees of the spruce forests being mostly stunted and misshaped from constant exposure to the gales which sweep in from the open Pacific, logging operations are unlikely to reach this area for many years to come. The nearest road is over 100 miles away, with inaccessible mountain ranges between.

On Nov. 6, 1899, the Chilean barque Libertad foundered off Cape Cook. Her wreckage came ashore at Brooks Bay, the big bight immediately to the west. Two years later, the barque William Foster was wrecked on Solander Island.

FISHBOATS by the score have been lost in this area. In December, 1939, the fishpacker Great Northern V, out of Vancouver with a scow in tow, lost her rudder during a raging storm off Estevan Point. Her crew consisted of Captain George Skinner, his son Hugh, and Ted Bernard. Other boats having sought shelter, no one witnessed her plight, and having no radio, she was unable to call for assistance or give her position. For two days she drifted helplessly before the storm, finally bringing up on the rocks about five miles beyond Cape Cook.

It was here that Bernard was washed overboard and drowned. Soon the pounding seas had smashed the vessel into matchwood, but, fortunately the top of the pilothouse floated free. On this, father and son drifted ashore. Cut, bruised, exhausted from cold and exposure, with no food or matches and only the clothes they stood up in, they found shelter under a fallen tree. The elder Skinner had a weak heart. His son gathered bits of wreckage and made his father as comfortable as possible, cared for him for two days and then, wearing hip gum boots, set out in the direction of Quatsino to seek help.

Meanwhile, the vessel being unreported for a week, an extensive search of the coast was organized. A search plane from Zeballos sighted young Skinner after he had been walking four days along that rugged shoreline. So difficult was the going in places that he had only made about 12 miles. As a landing was impossible owing to the rough seas, the pilot dipped his wings as a signal to let the lad know that he had been seen. A fishing boat was commandeered at Winter Harbor, 20 miles away, and that night, young Skinner, the soles of his boots worn through and his feet badly cut by sharp rocks, was taken off the beach and flown to hospital at Zeballos. Gangrene had set in and he subsequently had to have three toes amputated.

The son told of his father's condition, and where to find him, and a search party was dispatched by boat from Quatsino to search the coast. Skinner was found alive, but reduced to skin and bone. He had lived for 22 days on nothing but water, which he squeezed from the rain-soaked moss. It had rained every day and night. No fire, no blankets, his only shelter the fallen tree and the windbreak his son had built from wreckage, and the man too weak to crawl to the beach in search of raw shellfish! Taken to hospital at Port Alice, Skinner made a quick recovery and in six months' time was back at sea, along with his son.

Cook Inlet in Alaska, at the head of which is the town of Anchorage, was also named after Captain Cook. After leaving Nootka, he sheltered there before entering the Bering Sea in hopes of finding the mythical "Northwest Passage," which was the primary purpose of his Pacific mission.